IS CREDIT FOR QUALITY SOUND?

W. C. RUEDIGER
George Washington University

The article by Merritt L. Hoblit entitled, "The High-School Unit: Quantity, Quality, and Credit," in the May, 1915, number of the *School Review* brings forward again the question of credit for quality. Mr. Hoblit says:

> Let there be a qualitative valuation of the student's work, expressed by five grades—A, B, C, D, E. Those obtaining grade A are given a credit toward graduation of 100 points for a five-hour course extending through a half-year, and proportionally less for shorter courses. Those obtaining B are credited with 90 per cent of the maximum quantitative value of the course; those obtaining grade C, with 80 per cent; those obtaining grade D, with 70 per cent; those obtaining grade E, with failure.

If this procedure is sound, why stop at D with 70 per cent? Why not go to 50, 60, 40, and down to 10 or 1 per cent? Would not each student who attended the class have gained something? What does or should a credit toward graduation mean, anyway? Especially, is it logically and educationally sound to grant quantitative credit for qualitative achievement?

In reference to the last question at least four answers in the negative occur to my mind.

It should be noticed in the first place that quantity and quality in school work are disparate; they cannot logically be interchanged. There is no inherent reason why they should vary concomitantly and always in the same direction. Each must be measured by itself and from the measure of one nothing can be safely inferred in respect to the measure of the other. Two students who have completed the same course in physics, for example, one with a grade of A and the other with C, may have a knowledge of precisely the same things, the difference lying entirely in the grasp upon this knowledge.

Nor can it be assumed that the bright pupil usually reads more widely than the other. Often, indeed, the seeming brightness of

the one is at least partly due to the fact that he confines himself strictly to the text and required reading while the other ventures liberally beyond. I have noticed this again and again. As an extreme example, I was recently surprised to find that one of my barely passing students in psychology was reading the whole of James's two-volume work alongside of the course, and claimed to be enjoying it, while a little questioning revealed the fact that some of the A and B students were doing nothing beyond the required work.

Secondly, it is a mistake to assume that we are not now giving credit for quality. The differentiation of marks into A, B, C, etc., symbolizes such credit. The significance of this differentiation of marks goes far beyond "empty honor," as this is termed in the catalogue of the University of Missouri (1913, p. 91). It is the main basis on which the selective function of education is realized. Other things being equal, it is the good student who is encouraged by awards of scholarships and fellowships, who is promoted into the faculty, and who is recommended more highly for available positions. High marks, distinctions, and the like are in themselves recommendations and are obviously more likely to open the opportunity for achieving tangible returns than the lack of them. In this manner good work in school leads ultimately to financial rewards just as good work does outside of school. An unrelated bonus, such as quantitative credit for quality constitutes, is not normally found outside of school.

But leaving tangible returns aside, is it even then fair to speak of honor as being empty? Isn't the satisfaction of standing well with one's parents, relatives, and friends, and of having them take pleasure in one's work worth something, subjectively considered? The actions of mankind leave no doubt upon the answer to this question.

If it is true, as it seems to be, that good work in school, as symbolized by high marks, is now given the credit that is economically, socially, and psychologically natural to it, it must follow that credit for quality gives a second and unnatural credit for the same thing. That is, in the scheme of credit for quality, credit is given twice for the same thing.

This unnatural credit, in the third place, introduces a vicious artificial incentive, as every other overemphasis of marks does in a measure. A mark is a symbol merely and cannot safely be allowed to stand for more than it symbolizes—quality of work. As soon as it is allowed to stand for more than that—for prizes, distinctions, extra credit—it shifts the attention to itself, away from the work, with a corresponding detriment to the genuine appreciation of the content of the work. The low ideals of scholarship that this engenders, the faulty methods of study that it introduces, the unwise selection of courses that it encourages, and the unwholesome pressure that it brings to bear upon the faculty, are well discussed by A. J. Ladd in the *Educational Review*, March, 1909.[1]

The fourth objection to credit for quality is the most serious of all. Such credit varies the educational content covered by the different students, and yet this variable content is indicated by the same diploma or degree.

The way this variation comes about may best be made clear by an example. Suppose that in a certain school there is a range in the variation of credit for quality so that a bright student could gain an average of 1.2 units of credit for each class-unit pursued, the medium student 1 unit, and the dull student 0.8 unit, and suppose that 60 units are required for graduation. The number of class-units that each of these students would actually have to take for graduation is found by dividing 60 respectively by 1.2, 1, and 0.8. This gives us 50, 60, and 75. That is, the dull student would actually have covered 50 per cent more ground than the bright student. Nor is this overdrawn. Indeed, some of the schemes proposed would allow a range of variation much greater than this.

According to the variation here indicated, the bright student would be 10 points short of the usual number of year-hours now required for graduation from college. Suppose this shortage had caused him to miss such studies as sociology, geology, astronomy, biblical literature, and the problems and history of philosophy. Would he be at all likely to make up this shortage, once he was out taking part in the world of affairs? Ten year-hours would have

[1] Ladd's complete discussion occurs in the *Western Journal of Education*, May, 1909.

enabled him to cover the fundamentals of at least three or four of these studies. Or if 50 year-hours are sufficient for general collegiate culture, why not reduce the college course to this minimum for all?

To test further the practical effect of this variation in educational extent introduced by credit for quality, let us attempt to apply it in an engineering school. Could it in fact be applied? Does not virtually every course in the curriculum of an engineering school have so specific an educational function to discharge that it could not be omitted without crippling the student? And is not the same thing essentially true of medical schools, dental schools, law schools, and other professional schools? And should it not be true of general culture schools?

With the passing of the old conception of mental discipline the primary emphasis in education has shifted from form or discipline to content. The primary function of general education is now regarded as being to equip the learner with a certain range of knowledge, ideals, and skill, objectively considered, that a certain stage of social participation, according to the collective wisdom of race, requires. It is, or should be, in its fundamentals, just about as definite a thing as preparation for a profession. That this is now not always so, is but an indication of our undeveloped educational theory and practice, from the standpoint of social and general vocational needs. When once it is recognized that elementary education has a definite function to perform, when it is recognized that the several cycles of general education each has a relatively clear-cut range of knowledge, ideals, and powers to develop, there will no longer be any room for this peculiar aberration known as credit for quality.

The advantages sought by the advocates of credit for quality are in the main three. They are (1) shortening the course for the abler students; (2) requiring compensatory tasks of students below the average; and (3) incentive for study.

That students should, within the range of pedagogical possibilities, be allowed to proceed at rates consonant with their different abilities is no doubt valid, but this is now being achieved without the assistance of credit for quality. Able students are

finishing both our high schools and our colleges in less than four years; occasionally, with a little work in the summer, in three years. A genuinely able student will carry eighteen or twenty hours a week just as efficiently as fifteen, often more so, and this method does not tempt him to omit any of the social inheritance to which he is entitled.

To require extra or supplementary work of dull students is no doubt also valid. But this work should be so assigned that it will reinforce specific weaknesses. This the scheme of credit for quality does not do. A student may get a low mark in English composition and compensate for it by taking work in a quite unrelated field, such as mathematics.

The correct method is illustrated by Harvard University in the course in Freshman English. All Freshmen who do not attain at least a grade of C are required to complete an additional half-course in English composition during the Sophomore year before credit in Freshman English is assigned. For the half-course taken in the Sophomore year no additional credit is given.

Instead of letting a doubtful student pass, or through failure require him to take the course over, let him take a supplementary course. Keep him working in the field until he has attained the standard of efficiency that may be justly demanded. This principle, while it involves administrative difficulties, may be extended indefinitely. It bears no relation to credit for quality, however.

The prodding effect of credit for quality was disposed of when it was classed as a vicious artificial incentive. While artificial incentives may have legitimate occasional use, they cannot be justified as a permanent thing. The trouble with too many high-school and college teachers is that they have no consistent grasp of educational theory, including the theory of motivation, and they are therefore unable to bring student and subject vitally together. The remedy need not be detailed.